Iraq Promises Leniency to U.S. Spy Suspect

Post 2-1-69

By William Tuohy
Los Angeles Times

BAGHDAD, Iraq, Jan. 31—The Iraqi government declared today it will show leniency toward the American engineer who has been under unspecified arrest, and said he might be released within a few days.

"This will show that the government of Iraq is in a position to give pardon, and acts from a position of strength," said Information Minister Abdullah Salloum Samerral.

Samerrai said the engineer—Paul Bail of the Iraq Petroleum Company—was arrested about a month ago "while engaged in action which belongs to the nature of espionage."

Investigating Case

The Iraqi government, the spokesman said, has been investigating Bail's case since his arrest and "the nature of his responsibility in this matter."

"The government will take a lenient attitude toward this person," said the spokesman.

In a wide-ranging 90-minute news conference the Information Minister also made the following points:

- The Iraqi army and government plan no retaliation for the alleged Israeli air attack on its army positions in Jordan Thursday. [Israel denied such an attack took place.]
- The execution Monday of 14 spies, including nine Jews, did not reflect anti-Semitism.
- Iraqi Jewry's elderly Grand Rabbi Sason Khadouri would appear on national television to state the convicted spies received a just trial, and that there was no discrimination against Jews practicing their religion in Iraq.
- The government would show, "no mercy" toward any Iraqis convicted of espionage in the future. "A government which sent to the gallows a number of spies is perfectly capable of sending to the gallows another batch of spies," said the Information Minister.
- The bodies of the 14 dead men were hung publicly for six hours Monday "to undercut any attempts by any other espionage networks. . . . All divine religions make the point that punishment is a lesson which will dissuade others from committing such crimes," said the spokesman. "The Jews once suspended Jesus Christ at the Crucifixion—and in a most ugly manner."

Government Case

The news conference was held to present the official government justification for the hangings, which brought on worldwide criticism.

The Information Minister said "the trials were properly conducted," and the evidence showed the defendants had spied "on behalf of Israel." Testimony at the trial was "broadcast to public opinion, except those parts bearing on national security," he said.

"Iraq had every legitimate right to bring to trial members of these espionage networks," he said. He said the defendants not only were Jews but also members of the Moslem and Christian faiths. As for worldwide opinion, the spokesman said, "the question of espionage networks is purely a domestic issue."

"The reason they were sent to death was because they were spies, not because they were Moslems, Christians or Jews."

Minister Samerrai read a statement attributed to Grand Rabbi Khadouri which the Jewish leader will read over television.

"I hereby declare the Jews of Iraq, as well as Moslems and Christians, enjoy absolute freedom to exercise all their religious rights and carry on their business with complete freedom," said the statement.

Another statement declared: "I support and believe the revolutionary court is a just court, and that its hearings were legal."

Lebanese Cabinet Given Approval

The Lebanese parliament yesterday gave Premier Rashid Karami's cabinet a vote of confidence, easing a month-long government crisis.

Factional bickering has simmered in Beirut ever since the Israeli commando raid on the capital's airport Dec. 28.

While the 13-hours of debate went on Thursday, some 75 per cent of Beirut's shops and offices closed in a one-day protest strike called by the right-wing Tripartite Alliance. It charged right-wingers were excluded from Karami's "leftist cabinet." Steel-helmeted riot police patrolled streets during the strike.

Syria's ruling Baath Party claimed Thursday that a prominent Iraqi army officer was assassinated in Baghdad last week. It hinted that the rival Baath faction now ruling in Iraq was behind the alleged slaying.

In a statement broadcast over Damascus Radio, the Syrian Baath Pan-Arab command said Iraqi Col. Abulkarim Mustafah Nassrat was stabbed to death at his home by "agents of a tyrannical gang whose reality is becoming more clear to the Iraqis."

Baghdad Radio had reported Nassrat's death as due to a "long illness."

Nassrat's tanks played a major role in the coup that toppled the pro-Communist regime of the late Iraqi dictator Abdul Karim Kassem in 1963. Months later, Nassrat had a falling out with the coup leaders and was jailed and tortured.

Syrian newspapers Thursday carried a statement by Iraqi students in Damascus, charging their home government with "ultra-rightist and counter revolutionary" policies. They called for the overthrow of the present Iraqi regime of President Ahmad Hassan Al-Bakr.

On Wednesday, the Syrian Foreign Ministry claimed Iraqi intelligence officers shot a Syrian diplomat in Baghdad. It demanded an urgent inquiry.

Premier Levi Eshkol of Israel promised to spare no effort to ease the plight of Jews living in Iraq and other Arab lands. He made the pledge to a delegation of Jewish immigrants from Arab nations.

Israeli officials Thursday night said they would seek U.N.-supervised evacuation of Jews from Iraq.

Rep. William F. Ryan (D-Lib, N.Y.) introduced a bill in Congress to give special immigrant status to Iraqi Jews who wish to come to the United States. Sen. Joseph D. Tydings (D-Md.) proposed in a letter to Secretary of State Rogers that the United States offer asylum to the Iraqi Jews.